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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 001024

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR DRL AND G/TIP FOR MEGAN HALL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ELAB](#) [SOCI](#) [UZ](#)
SUBJECT: UNICEF PLANS INFORMAL CHILD LABOR ASSESSMENT
DURING COTTON HARVEST

REF: TASHKENT 949

Classified By: Political Officer Tim Buckley for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On August 27 Charge and poloff met with UNICEF Representative in Uzbekistan Mahboob Shareef to discuss plans to assess the extent of child labor during the cotton harvest season as well as the agenda for the upcoming September 16-18 Executive Board Meeting in New York. Shareef reported that, despite initial hopes, there will not be an official assessment in conjunction with the Government of Uzbekistan. However, he said UNICEF will conduct an informal assessment to gather sorely-needed data about the prevalence of child labor. He also believes that authorities have specific instructions this year, as a result of rising international pressure, not to take children out of school to perform labor. Nonetheless, he cautioned that the quota system may still compel local officials to resort to child labor. Shareef recommended urging the Government of Uzbekistan to make a strong political statement against the use of child labor and to continue gradual efforts to address the problem; we agree with his assessment that the problem "cannot be resolved overnight." Shareef also discussed shortcomings in Uzbekistan's education system and highlighted proposed UNICEF's plans to address them. End summary.

Informal Assessment Only

¶2. (C) Charge d'Affaires and poloff met on August 27 with Shareef to discuss the status of UNICEF's plans to conduct an assessment of the extent of child labor during the fall cotton harvest season. Shareef lamented that, despite initial hope, the Government of Uzbekistan ultimately would not agree to working together on an official assessment. Alternatively, UNICEF plans to conduct an informal assessment to gauge the problem, about which little concrete data is available despite the high profile of the issue. He underscored that Uzbekistan will not shake its image problem without doing its part to prove child labor is not a problem,

as it claims.

Quotas May Drive Children to the Fields

13. (C) Shareef believes that, as a result of mounting international attention to the child labor issue, education officials have been instructed not to suspend courses or take children younger than age 15 out of school in order to support the fall harvest. While this is a step forward, Shareef noted that the strict quota system in which each province is assigned a share of the expected national cotton yield can still compel local officials to mobilize children. Provincial governors (or khokims) are held personally responsible for ensuring that the quota is met, and they in turn pass this pressure along to each township and district. Fearful local officials may ultimately resort to conscripting children to ensure that the quota is met, regardless of good intentions by education officials not to disrupt the academic year. Shareef stated that cotton generates USD one billion for the Government of Uzbekistan annually and provides crucial employment and income for millions -- even if the wages are extremely low -- and the pressure will not disappear.

Structural Reforms Needed in Ag Sector

14. (C) In addition to the quota system, Shareef also discussed the need for greater mechanization in the cotton sector, as neighboring Turkmenistan is doing with some

success. He said that even with mechanical cultivation there is still a need for human labor to assist with approximately 40 percent of the crop, but the reduction in manual labor would make a big difference. Shareef also explained that Uzbekistan needs to diversify by adding different varieties of cotton plants, which would help improve yields and reduce the need to scour the fields as thoroughly. Another serious problem is that experienced farm laborers travel to Kazakhstan in large numbers during the harvest season where, unlike in Uzbekistan, they earn better wages and get paid on time. This seasonal outmigration reduces the pool of available laborers and increases the likelihood children will be pressed into service.

Government Officials Divided

15. (C) Shareef observed that he has encountered two distinct groups within the Government of Uzbekistan: officials like Minister of Foreign Economic Relations Ganiev on one hand who acutely understand the business implications of potential boycotts or sanctions and want to find solutions to child labor problems; and on the other hand "hard-liners" who bristle at what they see as international meddling and are unfazed by international criticism. The key question, according to Shareef, is who will emerge on top in the struggle for influence. Shareef recently attended a meeting of multiple government agencies at which Ganiev forcefully told a deputy minister of education not to engage children in cotton harvesting this year. He conceded this could have been staged for his benefit but, regardless, it was the first time he has heard an official speaking so cogently on the subject. Another test will be the status of the draft national action plan on child labor, which reportedly stalled in the Cabinet of Ministers due to disagreements over its content.

16. (C) Shareef said Uzbekistan would greatly aid its cause if President Karimov issued a strong political statement against the use of child labor, which would send a message that he is concerned. This had an impact in neighboring Turkmenistan, Shareef noted, after former President Niyazov took this first step in 2005, which was followed up by a published message in 2006. His successor, President Berdimukhamedov, repeated this in 2007 and 2008, which helped set a new tone throughout the government. However, Shareef said that Foreign Minister

Norov recently restated the long-held official Uzbek position that child labor "is not an issue here."

Executive Board Meeting

17. (C) UNICEF's Regional Executive Board Meeting will be held from September 16-18 in New York, and Shareef predicted that the issue of child labor in Uzbekistan "will definitely come up." He said that Uzbekistan's Ambassador to the U.S., Abdulaziz Kamilov, will be invited to make a statement. Shareef expressed hope that the board will recognize engagement as the most productive strategy since "Uzbekistan cannot resolve this problem in isolation." He specifically encouraged the U.S. representative to support a strategy of engagement as the most promising way forward.

Shortcomings in Education System

18. (C) In addition to child labor issues, Shareef mentioned that access to education is not an issue for Uzbekistan's youth, but rather the quality of education is a main concern. School readiness is also a problem, as grade one is typically the first structured educational setting most Uzbek

students encounter; Shareef noted this is in contrast to the Soviet era when there was a decent pre-school system in place, particularly on collective farms. He noted that there is a lot of highly visible "bricks and mortar" investment in schools throughout the country, but he lamented that there has been no effort to link this with qualitative improvement.

Therefore, UNICEF is planning to work with the Government of Uzbekistan, particularly with Deputy Khokims (governors) responsible for local education affairs, to train teachers, revise curriculums, and establish more pre-schools at the mahalla (neighborhood) level.

Comment:

19. (C) In declining UNICEF's overtures to conduct an official joint assessment on child labor, the Government of Uzbekistan missed an opportunity to build good will, which could further sharpen the criticism leveled against it. Officials in Tashkent are doubtless worried about what results a full assessment would turn up since even they are probably unaware of how far provincial officials actually go to meet the cotton quotas. The Government of Uzbekistan has shown an increased willingness to admit problems this year -- officials now openly refer to mistakes in handling Andijon, the existence of trafficking in persons crimes, and shortcomings in the legal system -- and we will try to convince Uzbek officials that similar frankness can be an important step in resolving an issue that threatens its economic lifeblood. Meanwhile, we agree with UNICEF Representative Shareef that our interests in advancing progress on child labor here would best be served by supporting a strategy of engagement at the upcoming UNICEF Regional Executive Board Meeting on September 16 in New York.

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